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‘...POLTERN UND WÜRGEN UND DROHEN UND WÜTEN...’: THE AESTHETIC PROJECT OF JOHANNES R. BECHER (1891–1958)

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This article examines aspects of the avant-garde poetic practice of Johannes R. Becher up to the end of the First World War. Taking issue with critical approaches that either read Becher’s work with hindsight from the perspective of his later engagement with Stalinism or that interpret it in reductive biographical terms, this essay instead acknowledges the variety and originality of Becher’s poetic project. It explores aspects of Becher’s self-presentation as ‘Dichter’ in this period, as well as his radical demolition and reconstruction of the humanist tradition.

KEYWORDS: *Johannes R. Becher, Futurism, image of the ‘Dichter’, tradition, reception*

We think that we know Johannes R. Becher, that the last word has been said: bourgeois rebel, activist Expressionist, pseudo-proletarian revolutionary, Stalinist and, all too belatedly, renegade; an important, but second-rank writer for whom Mayakovsky’s dictum about the poet who trod on the throat of his song might have been coined; the scribbler whose only genuinely significant work was done by the mid-1920s; the poet-politician who betrayed both callings; the pseudo-revolutionary searching for a substitute father; the unoriginal scrambler after passing literary fashions. Becher’s life and career certainly offer material for such views: born on 22 May 1891 in Munich, Becher belonged to the generation of writers who mythologized their complex and incomplete break with the certainties of the Wilhelmine *Bürgertum* (Becher’s father was a judge) as a revolt of the Sons against the Fathers. Morphine addiction, mental illness and the consequences of injuries suffered in 1910 in a suicide pact with Franziska (Fanny) Fuss, who died in the attempt, meant that Becher spent several years in a state of rebellion against and dependency on his family, while beginning to make his name as a writer. The war years were spent between ‘Berlin Bohemia’, anti-war activism and rehabilitation clinics. He joined the USPD in 1917 and the KPD in 1919, but only committed himself finally to the KPD in 1923 after a period of disillusion; he was a founder member of the Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller (1928). After the Nazi seizure of power, he emigrated via Prague and Paris to the USSR, where he became a member of the KPD Central Committee, and edited the exile journal *Internationale Literatur*. On returning to Germany in 1945, he founded the

Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands as well as many of the institutions of literary life in the GDR; in 1954, he became the GDR's first Minister of Culture, although Becher's ambivalent sympathy with anti-Stalinist reform movements in 1956 led to his isolation and the removal of his power after Walter Ulbricht re-established control: thereafter he was little more than a figurehead. Shortly before his death in 1958, he renounced Stalinism in a text that remained unpublished until 1988.

Although there is an element of truth in all of the dismissive views of Becher and his career, they still echo with the literary-political debates of the Cold War, during which Becher became a focus for polemic and was raised to exemplary status as representative of the 'failure' of German literary humanism in the face of totalitarianism. Terms like 'gespalten' or 'zerrissen' are used to link Becher's supposedly 'divided' psyche with the 'dividedness' of aesthetics and politics in the German twentieth century. Becher himself undoubtedly encouraged this view, drawing on traditions of talking about the dichotomy of politics and culture in Germany in the public performance of his own subjectivity.

We should perhaps resist the temptation to adopt Becher's own terms in describing his own psychology, since the idea of 'Gespaltenheit' is so clearly adopted from the cultural discourses that Becher writes his life into. It may be useful to avoid a psychological reading of the work entirely, since this has been the default position of the majority of critics, including myself,¹ and it leads us to overlook and underestimate aspects of the texts themselves; the fact that psychological readings of the work are also closely implicated with the cultural narratives of the Cold War should make us even more cautious about their usefulness.

This essay will therefore not be concerned with recounting Becher's biography, or with a psychological interpretation of his work: the reader is referred to the recent biographies by Jens-Fietje Dwars and Alexander Behrens, which have provided accounts of his intellectual and literary development and political positioning.² Instead, after exploring some recent critical approaches to his work, I will discuss some aspects of Becher's avant-garde aesthetic project, looking at questions of his self-representation as an artist and at his exploration of tensions arising from the use of forms such as the sonnet and modern experiences of violence and dissolution.

Any end-point one could set for a discussion of Becher's Expressionist/Futurist writing would be somewhat arbitrary, since there are so many threads that lead from his work in the 1910s to the poetry and prose that he produced in the mid-1920s, such as the collection *Maschinen=Rhythmen* (published in 1926, though

¹ See for example Peter Davies, 'Johannes R. Becher', in Stephen Parker, Peter Davies and Matthew Philpotts, *The Modern Restoration: Re-thinking German Literary History, 1930-1960* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 224-61; Peter Davies, 'Ein schönes, ungetrenntes Ganzes: Johannes R. Becher and the Kulturation', in *1949/1989: Cultural Perspectives on Division and Unity in East and West*, ed. by Clare Flanagan and Stuart Taberner, *German Monitor* 50 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 27-42.

² Alexander Behrens, *Johannes R. Becher: Eine politische Biographie* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003); Jens-Fietje Dwars, *Abgrund des Widerspruchs: Das Leben des Johannes R. Becher* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1998).

written mostly in 1922), the novel $(CHCl=CH)_3As$ (*Levisite*) oder *Der einzig gerechte Krieg* (1925), or the poetry produced during his phase of disillusionment with the KPD. I will therefore take the end of the First World War as the cut-off point for this essay, since part of its purpose is to explore Becher's creative response to the War: this will inevitably leave unexplored the very fertile creative period in the early 1920s, in which his work benefited from the series of political and ideological crises that he went through.

*

Readings of Becher's Expressionist work often mine it for clues to explain his later engagement with Stalinism, as if this were the lens through which his life and work must be interpreted. This retrospective narrative structure still reflects some of the concerns of mid-twentieth-century debates about the relationship between Modernism, Avant-gardism and totalitarian politics, as well as Becher's own retrospective shaping of his biography. Becher carries with him through his career an avant-gardist's tendency to the public performance of a subjectivity constructed out of fragments of contemporary discourses: prestigious imagery and attitudes distorted and reflected back on their originators, all tied together by highly provisional and shifting narratives of the self that cannot conceal their own artificiality. There is, after all, a compelling psychological portrait to be drawn from the tension between chaos and order in the work, and the constantly repeated gesture in which contradiction, passivity, anxiety, and 'decadence' are swept away in narratives of enforced self-overcoming decked out in whatever ideological colours happen to be currently available.³ Nevertheless, a strictly psychologizing reading can lead us to seriously underestimate the inventiveness and variety of his best work, and to fail to take it seriously as an aesthetic project and a rich and determining contribution to avant-garde literary practice in German. The same applies to analyses that scan the early work for explanations for his later political commitments: there are useful things to find, but aesthetic categories become subordinated to political ones, and overarching psychological-political narratives are imposed on individual texts in reading his work.

It is perhaps no surprise in this context that much of the work on Becher that emerged in the 1990s was biographical, reading his life and work in the context of post-Wende debates about totalitarianism, in particular in the wake of the posthumous publication in 1988 in *Sinn und Form* of his final repudiation of Stalinism.⁴ Readings of Becher's life became caught up in the post-Wende settling of scores, and tended either to indulge in triumphalist accusations of the 'betrayal'

³ Cf. Peter Davies, 'Die Überwindung der Sprache: Johannes R. Bechers Weg in die Partei', in *Engagierte Literatur zwischen den Weltkriegen. Schriften der Ernst-Toller-Gesellschaft* 4, ed. by Stefan Neuhaus, Rolf Selbmann and Thorsten Unger (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002), pp. 277–85.

⁴ Johannes R. Becher, 'Selbstzensur', *Sinn und Form*, 40 (1988), 543–51.

of the calling of literature,⁵ or to engage in the kind of apologetics that led Hans Mayer to call Becher 'ein Glücksfall für die Literatur'.⁶

Jens-Fietje Dwar's biography dealt with many of the myths surrounding Becher's life, and provided a thorough and critically sympathetic reading of his work that acknowledged its aesthetic strengths and weaknesses, while also reading against the grain of critical accounts that see no worth in the work Becher produced from the 1920s. Alexander Behrens has traced Becher's political positioning throughout his career, though he tends to read the poetry as a direct expression of a political viewpoint, asking to what extent Becher 'in politischen Kategorien zu denken versteht', or whether his political poetry shows a genuine understanding of events like the Russian Revolution, as if that were possible in 1917.⁷

Other biographical studies have taken the less productive approach of demolishing Becher's self-stylization, and in particular his unreliable accounts of his upbringing and the break with his family. Hermann Weber questions the honesty of Becher's descriptions of his father, as if it were enough to point out the 'dishonesty' of a literary revolt by examining whether its stylized myth of origins corresponds to biographical fact, while Fritz Raddatz sets up a dichotomy between 'genuine' suffering and performance ('Antinomie aus Leid und Fassade') that he claims to find in the work.⁸ Similarly, Hans Dieter Schäfer divides Becher's poetry into 'external' and 'internal' works, with the 'official', political poetry characterized by empty formalism, while his best work is subjective, and thus 'glaubwürdig'.⁹

It is difficult to see how one might locate the 'genuine' suffering in these texts, and Raddatz's judgement that the revolutionary political statements are dishonest, while the personal suffering is genuine, reveals more about the desire of the interpreter to depoliticize the work and preserve the possibility of a humanistic reading of the artist's personality through the text than it does about the texts themselves. The notion of the artist's private, inner realm is one that is challenged radically in Becher's Expressionist work, and although the later work attempts to reconstruct a subjectivity in opposition to the external world of politics, this subjectivity is pieced together from the fragments of the same prestigious humanist literary tradition that his critics are beholden to: it is therefore no wonder that

⁵ See Hans Dieter Zimmermann, *Der Wahnsinn des Jahrhunderts: Die Verantwortung der Schriftsteller in der Politik: Überlegungen zu Johannes R. Becher, Gottfried Benn, Ernst Bloch, Bert Brecht, Georg Büchner, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Martin Heidegger, Heinrich Heine, Stephan Hermlin, Peter Huchel, Ernst Jünger, Heiner Müller, Friedrich Nietzsche, Hans Werner Richter, Rainer Maria Rilke und anderen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992); Fritz J. Raddatz, 'Die Selbstverstümmelung des Johannes R. Becher', *Die Zeit*, 1 November 1991, pp. 73–74.

⁶ Hans Mayer, *Der Turm von Babel: Erinnerung an eine Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 111.

⁷ Behrens, p. 53.

⁸ Hermann Weber, *Juristensöhne als Dichter: Hans Fallada, Johannes R. Becher und Georg Heym* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2009); Fritz J. Raddatz, *Literarische Grenzgänger* (Munich: List, 2002), p. 240.

⁹ Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein: Über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit, 1930–1960* (Munich: Hanser, 1981), p. 98.

sympathetic critics invest so much energy in finding echoes of their own self-understanding in the work.

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The poetry that Becher wrote during the 1910s explores the impact of violence and rapid technological innovation on a bourgeois world that had thought that it had these forces under its control: technology was to be channelled into the project of nation building and international rivalry, and violence was to be exported to the colonies. Becher registers the moment at which these forces turn back in on themselves.

For a writer from a bourgeois background, the challenge to the humanist inheritance was a matter of extreme tension and anxiety, and Becher responds to the challenge whole-heartedly. His work is an affront to the carefully constructed principles of bourgeois *Innerlichkeit* and to the idea of a private subjectivity preserved out of reach of the influences of the world: there is no clear, ordered story of masculine development to 'master' the world by assimilating it into a narrative structure that forces a clear division between internal and external. He explores in (sometimes interminable) detail the fragmentation of the bourgeois consciousness under the pressures of modernity, maintaining a fine balance in the work between dissolution and the imposition of order; order is always *imposed*, rather than being *found* in the material.

Readings that concentrate on trying to separate the true from the false, or especially the inner from the outer life, do not really do justice to Becher's aesthetic project to test the structures of bourgeois subjectivity to destruction. One of his most important tools in this project is the image of the 'Dichter', which undergoes a number of transformations as his work progresses, from a rather hackneyed, prophetic figure cobbled together from his self-indulgent reading of Richard Dehmel and other fin-de-siècle figures, to something much more abstract: more than just the individualistic 'Bürgerschreck' or prophetic 'Mahner', but an integrating principle and catalyst. He pushes the bourgeois idea of the 'Dichter' as far as it will go — expanding it to include the world and discarding any notion of the poet as the guardian of the inner life — but he never succeeds in decentring or deconstructing it, as other modernists were doing.

Dwars puts it like this:

Noch ganz im (bildungsbürgerlich) tradierten Selbstverständnis von Dichtung als Bekenntnislyrik verankert, will Becher der große Dichter der neuen Zeit sein, ohne zu begreifen, daß die Moderne eben diesen Anspruch, das Ganze der multiperspektivisch erscheinenden Welt in einem lyrischen Ich zu vereinen, aufgibt.¹⁰

This unwillingness to abandon the integrative role of the 'Dichter-Persönlichkeit' is one of the features of his Expressionist work, leaving it in a telling state of tension between tradition and modernity: Becher's explorations of extreme states depend

¹⁰ Dwars, p. 69.

for their effect on the implied presence of traditional poetic forms, particularly ones that have an ideological significance in the German tradition. If his post-Expressionist career can be said to reveal anything, it is the violence against the self that is necessary to reassert the cultural order against its challengers. Having explored the fragmentation and reconstruction of the bourgeois consciousness under the strains of modernity, he is unable to propose any solution apart from the forcible reconstruction of the fragmented tradition and the exclusion of undesirable aspects of the self as 'decadent'.

Becher's approach to the sonnet is a case in point. He insists that the reader make the syntactic and narrative connections that the form implies, while either hollowing out the form from within by withholding easy connections, or by creating tension between form and content, which he often figures in terms of violence. The simultaneous critique and forceful reaffirmation of the form that this entails reveals the violence inherent in the reassertion of the humanist tradition. Becher forces the sonnet under extreme pressure to show how far it can be pushed and still supply meaning as a form. One could say the same about his approach to the verse collection or lyric cycle: these products of bourgeois poetics, authorial self-presentation and literary marketing seem to have been all but destroyed in the extraordinary, excessive collections that Becher produced in this period, but interpretations that read Becher's work in the light of his morphinism and chaotic lifestyle miss the controlling intelligence and discipline at work in putting them together. Excess is in itself a poetic principle here, testing the constraints of the tradition, exposing the tensions imposed by them, and exploring how far the idea of the bourgeois poetic personality can be pushed without discarding it entirely.

Becher's first publications, produced in his precarious collaboration with Heinrich F.S. Bachmair, were ambitious beyond what his poetic language could cope with. The daring of the 'Kleist-Hymne', *Der Ringende* (1911), lies as much in Bachmair's attempt to burst onto the market with a decidedly non-commercial text as in the overwrought rhetoric of the poem itself.¹¹ Becher's self-presentation as a 'Dichter' is supported by colleagues like Bachmair, who link the role of publisher and poet, aiming for explosive, transformative 'events' that have media effects beyond the small print run that their finances made possible. The poem gains some of its force as an intervention in the celebrations of the centenary of Kleist's death, and cuts against the image of Kleist as a national hero. Behrens notes a disjunction between the desire for mass public attention and the elitist and bibliophile production quality of the text,¹² but quite apart from economic realities, the attempt to merge momentarily in a single performance cultural elitism with large-scale publicity is a genuinely avant-gardist gesture: its financial failure doesn't make it less so, and the frantic publicity does ensure that Becher begins to gain critical attention for his work.

The gesture of 'exploding onto the scene' that characterizes Becher's approach to publicity is a deliberate provocation of the established rules of the career of the

¹¹ Johannes R. Becher, 'Der Ringende', *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Johannes-R.-Becher-Archiv der Akademie der Künste der DDR, 13 vols (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1966–81), 1 (1966), pp. 7–14. References to this volume will from now on be made in the text as *JRB* 1.

¹² Behrens, p. 25. Becher's father also provided financial support for the publication.

professional writer: from juvenilia through early promise to mature mastery, all supported by a thoroughly bourgeois work ethic. The supposed spontaneity of the gesture, and the language of dynamism and prophetic inspiration that accompanies it, belie the sheer concentrated effort that went into producing the collections: Becher was clearly even at this stage a more disciplined writer than he is given credit for, despite the chaotic circumstances of his life.

The collection *Verfall und Triumph* (1914), which was prepared by Bachmair but published finally by Hyperion after Bachmair's bankruptcy, represents the moment before the image-world of war and the aesthetic impulse of Futurism allow Becher to move in a new, more radical direction. The collection is extraordinary and varied, with verse and prose texts, with the poems almost exclusively presented in forms recognisable from the tradition: sonnets and rhyming quatrains predominate, and the influence of Baudelaire can be felt in many places.

There is not sufficient space here to discuss Becher's prose works, although the texts collected in *Verfall und Triumph*, in particular the Novelle *Das kleine Leben*, deserve more critical attention than they have received. The separation of poetry and prose characteristic of the Aufbau collected edition of Becher's works re-establishes a hierarchy of genre that Becher had questioned and disrupted in his earlier work.

The structuring tension in the collection is between the story told by the opening and final poems ('Eingang'/'Ausgang', *JRB* 1, 41–42 and 169–70) and in the titles of individual sections ('Verfall'; 'De Profundis'; 'Die Stadt der Qual'; 'Der irdische und der himmlische Gesang'; 'Triumph'), and the variety of the poems themselves: the structural elements force the poems into a narrative of overcoming decadence, lending each one a significance beyond itself. 'Decadence' is always that which is in the process of being overcome.

The opening and closing poems frame the collection in terms of corruption, decadence and apocalypse. Becher is not shy of exploiting hackneyed language in the images of the poet and his female muse: 'Der düstere Dichter im gewohnten Straßenkleide | Stelzt durch den heiligen Tag, den Sonne groß entzündet. | Die blonde Muse trippelt zwitschernd ihm zur Seite' (*JRB* 1, 41). The 'Dichter' who appears in the opening is the embodiment of the clichés and corruption of bourgeois society turning in on themselves with violence and without hope of progress or redemption; a process of physical and psychic self-destruction leaves him in a near-death state from which he can plot the infiltration and poisoning of society from within:

Vernichtung sinnend, klügelnd aus, wie ich verwunde,
Wie ich gewaltig schreck die gänzlich Unbedachten,
Umstricke tödlich sie mit schmählichstem Verdachte,
In selige Räusche menge unerhörtes Gift... (*JRB* 1, 42)

The collection concludes with an Expressionist *Totentanz*: the dead dance away in a wild carnival leaving the living to mourn and wait for bodily destruction (*JRB* 1, 170). In this final poem, there is no utopia or wholeness in view, just longing for disintegration. However, the preceding poem, 'Triumph' (*JRB* 1, 168) presents a

different resolution in the overcoming of the decadence of the body and the discovery of a utopia that equates bodily wholeness with the end of language:

Einst wankten wir durch Gassen wirre Netze,
Zerdacht die Stirnen und von Fluch bedrückt.
Tod deckte auf die Herrlichkeiten=Schätze,
Wir voll erlebend, stumm und unzerstückt.

Becher's ability to find strikingly simple images to open up a utopian moment at the end of a complex process of linguistic destruction is on display here, and the poem makes a claim to represent the overcoming of the collection's conflicts; it stands in contrast with the darker 'Ausgang', two possibilities without resolution.

The poems in the collection move from grotesque games with the language of drug use and bodily disintegration ('Krankenhaus', *JRB* 1, 104–07) through poems depicting the grotesqueness of bohemian café existence ('Café', *JRB* 1, 55–58) to fantasies of vengeance and apocalypse in which the poet calls up forces that sweep away the encrustations of civilization ('Berlin', *JRB* 1, 129–32). The view of Becher as the poet of apocalyptic destruction (a view that he himself encouraged) has obscured our view of the quieter, more complex and occasionally surreal verbal creativity that comes to the fore throughout *Verfall und Triumph* in poems like 'Der Wald' (*JRB* 1, 142–44): here, the poet speaks as the *Urwald* colonizing the imagination and desire of the civilized world ('Ich bin der Wald, der fährt durch abendliche Welt, gelöst | Vom Grund, verbreitend euch betäubenden Geruch'). The most striking poems are those, like the sonnet cycle 'Herbst-Gesänge', that search for a new language to deal with addiction, corruption and bodily decay, and which explore literary forms without the sound and fury of his grand political gestures (*JRB* 1, 46–49).¹³

Becher is also capable of a self-mockery that is not usually associated with his work: 'Café' is a description of the self-aggrandizing emptiness of bohemian café society:

So harren wir in allen Nächten spät,
Daß unser Herz was Seltsames erfahre.
Daß nur kein fremder Hauch, kein Licht uns rühre,
Sonst sind zerfallen wir und ausgeweht.
[...]

Schon flutet wieder nieder die Empörung.
Wir fuchteln nur mit Armen zuckend=wirr.
Wir schlingen trüber lächelnd die Verschwörung,
Da wirbeln alle Gläser mit Geklirr. (*JRB* 1, 56 and 58. Italics in original)

Poems like this are interspersed with others in which a formal measure forcibly brings together melancholy reflection and violence, as in 'Toten=Messe', dedicated to Fanny Fuss, which shows facility in its handling of Dantesque *terza*

¹³ See Parker, Davies and Philpotts, pp. 232–34, for a discussion of this cycle.

rima (JRB 1, 108–12), but cannot quite bring itself to express the melancholy undercurrent of the poem directly.

Satirical poems like ‘Deutschland’ (JRB 1, 73–74) or ‘Beengung’ (JRB 1, 76–77) achieve their effects through sarcasm rather than striking images; the turning of regular form and metre against the bourgeois tradition is little more than a provocation of the café-going public (‘In Cafés und Cinémas Spießbürger hocken. | Und Goethe glänzt, aufrecht und widerlich’, JRB 1, 76), and Becher acknowledges the hopeless emptiness of the posture of rebellion against the tedium of the world:

Die Welt wird zu enge. Wir zittern und frieren
In Domen und modrigen Schauerrevieren...
Und poltern und würgen und drohen und wüten... (JRB 1, 77)

This last line could stand as a commentary on a number of the poems in the collection that simply repeat the gestures of apocalyptic destruction and renewal without quite breaking through into new territory: ‘Berlin’ (JRB 1, 129–32) shows clearly the tension between a rather tired prophetic image of the ‘Dichter’ (‘Einst kommen wird der Tag!... Es ruft ihn der Dichter, | Daß er aus Ursprungs Schächten schneller her euch reise!’) and a desire to forcibly remake the language to reflect experiences of violence (‘Es schlagen zu mit Knall der Häuser Särgebretter. | Zerschmeißen euch. Es hallelujen Explosionen’). The encounter with Futurism and the imaginative space opened up by the war will provide the impetus that Becher requires to take a further step in the radicalization of his style.

The collection *An Europa* (1915) commences the extraordinary sequence of Futurist-influenced word experiments that would characterize much of Becher’s work for nearly a decade. The influence of Futurism is so pervasive in these works that Norbert Hopster pointed out already in 1969 that the term ‘Expressionist’ may be of limited use in categorizing Becher’s work;¹⁴ Peter Demetz and Jens-Fietje Dwars have also explored Futurist influences on Becher’s work.¹⁵ I have argued elsewhere that Becher employs Futurist aesthetic practices as a way of ‘overcoming’ the ambivalence and anxiety associated with Expressionism and his own troubled past, a psychological interpretation that is offered by texts such as ‘Gedichte für ein Volk’ (1917):¹⁶

Hinweg über alle Depressionistischen, Zwitterhaften, Ungreifbaren, Unplastischen, Beschaulichen, Dekadenten, Exzentrischen, Lyrischen, Egozentrischen, Literarischen, Künstlerischen, Anarchistischen, Passiven, Mimosenhaften, Pazifistischen, Privaten... hinweg über sie alle und heran — hinauf — empor mit euch Imperativsten, Expressionisten, Hellstägigen, Morgendlichen, immer Attackenhaften, Athleten, Ethischen, Repräsentativen, Organisatorischen, Sozialistischen, Unpersönlichen,

¹⁴ Norbert Hopster, *Das Frühwerk Johannes R. Bechers* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1969), p. 1.

¹⁵ Peter Demetz, ‘The Futurist Johannes R. Becher’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 1 (1994), 179–94; Dwars, pp. 83–86.

¹⁶ Parker, Davies and Philpotts, p. 236.

Totalen, Eindeutigen, Weiblosen, Fabelhaften, den Männern! den Politikern! den Tätern! (*JRB* I, 408)

It is of course notable here that Becher uses the term 'Expressionist' in this tirade as a label for the desirable political, masculine hardness of the new aesthetic, which complicates matters. However, the clear distinction between Expressionist and Futurist aesthetics is one of scholarly convenience, having arisen in the retrospective process of sifting the products and practices of Modernism through aesthetic theory (a process that supports the professional specialization and autonomy of *Germanistik*). In the 1910s, the term 'expressionistisch' covered a multitude of Modernist aesthetic practices.

Becher's self-presentation as poet emphasizes the striven-for synthesis of aesthetics and politics, directing attention towards his virtuosic, externally focussed verbal radicalism, as in the piece he published in *Die Aktion* in 1915 to introduce *An Europa* (the piece was ultimately not included in the collection itself, but some of the material was used in the poem 'Gedichte für ein Volk', quoted above):

Ja —: unser neues Buch, *An Europa* betitelt, stellt sich nicht geringer die Aufgabe [...], heilige, schwerste, ruhmreichste Aufgabe, als Jüngster repräsentative Kraft aus dem gleichsam zu eiterigem Porphyr geronnenem knirschendem! Blut-Chaos endloser wirr über-, in- und durcheinander geschobener Schlacht-Flächen aufgebrochener Azure umwalltes Menschheits-Monument vereinter europäischer Völker mitzuerichten. ('Einleitung zu meinem neuen Versbuche', *JRB* XV, 20)

Here, Becher pushes the syntactical possibilities of German as far as they will go without breaking them and forming them anew: it is still (just) possible to follow this sentence using the rules of sentence formation and case agreement. Becher never goes further than this, since he is interested neither in the liberation of the word from syntax, nor in the abandonment of any kind of representational claim. Instead, grammatical structures — in particular here the potent word-glue of genitive constructions — force disparate images together in creative tension, with the aim of producing a utopian resolution.

Dwars describes Becher's technique as follows: 'Die Worte behaupten nicht mehr, nur Bomben zu sein im Aufruf zur anarchistischen Revolte wider die geordnete Welt, sie explodieren selbst, zerstören tatsächlich die Syntax, die tradierte Ordnung des Satzbaus.'¹⁷ It is certainly the case that the image-world of the War (along with Becher's encounter with Futurism through Else Hadwiger, one of the first German translators of Marinetti and Paolo Buzzi, and the circle around Herwarth Walden's journal *Der Sturm*) provided Becher with a new impetus, and Dwars is right to draw attention to Becher's significance as a poet of the War. However, it would not be true to say that Becher's verse 'destroys' the syntax of German; instead, he pushes it as far as it will go, exploring extreme linguistic situations in order to test the integrating and meaning-making properties of

¹⁷ Dwars, p. 75.

German syntax. Something always remains as a way of making or implying meaning: a poetic form, a grammatical structure, the echo of a classical metre. This technique is of a piece with Becher's exploration of poetic form and the boundaries of the bourgeois 'personality': the forms are reaffirmed through the extremity of the test to which they are subjected.

Even in the most politicized poems there is still a sense of play, of pleasure in experimentation, of radical changes in tone that are hard to pin down. For example, the opening poem of *An Europa*, 'Eingang' (JRB 1, 173–74), begins with what are perhaps Becher's most frequently quoted lines, after the text of the GDR national anthem:

Der Dichter meidet strahlende Akkorde.
Er stößt durch Tuben, peitscht die Trommel schrill.
Er reißt das Volk auf mit gehackten Sätzen.

The poem itself is about preparation and rehearsal for the role of poet, the pleasure of aesthetic self-creation:

Wie arbeite ich — hah leidenschaftlich! —
Gegen mein noch unplastisches Gesicht —:
Falten spanne ich.
Die Neue Welt
(— eine solche: die alte, die mystische, die Welt der Qual austilgend —)
Zeichne ich, möglichst korrekt, darin ein.

The new world is written onto the poet's face, 'korrekt', like a technical drawing, suggesting that a perfectly ordered, utopian Classicism is the aim: 'Eine besonnene, eine äußerst gegliederte, eine *geschliffene* Landschaft schwebt mir vor.' One should note that the opening lines, in which the practice of the fully formed poet is described, have the most regular metre. The poem veers between calls to prepare the 'Schlagwetteratmosphäre' of revolution, visions of utopia, and the speaker forming himself into the embodiment of his aesthetic practice. Even a poem like 'An die Dichter', which works consistently with a language of revolutionary violence, springs a surprise at the end with an image in a very different register:

Dichter... Nicht freundlich mehr dem kleinen Abenteuer.
Magnetisch sammle euer Aug von Zukunft Glanz!
Wer Dichter schreibt die Hymne an die Politik!?

O —: wem das Hackbeil knallt jäh ins Genick,
In Harfe splitternden Rückenmarks —: Dir Blutes Brähe
Schweb in Ballons mit Vögeln aus der Frühe!!! (JRB 1, 175. Italics in original)

Here, Becher employs the sonnet form in a way that exploits its narrative properties more clearly than in other texts, but he does so in order to emphasize the shock and illogic of the final twist more clearly, and to show how the poet's death breaks the bounds of the form.

The collection *An Europa* works consistently and repetitively on the image of the 'Dichter' as catalyst of change and embodiment of revolution. The aesthetics of hardness and activism pervades the collection ('Der Dichter grüßt euch Zwanzigjährige mit Bomben=Fäusten, | Der Panzerbrust, drin Lava gleich die neue Marseillaise wiegt!!', 'An die Zwanzigjährigen', *JRB* I, 179–80) and Becher's reflection on the role of the poet rarely deviates from this line. Nevertheless, the collection is not uniform in its tone, including poems like 'Auf ein Maschinengewehr' (*JRB* I, 181–82), a sequence of three sonnets visualizing the collapse of civilization through war from the perspective of an instrument of mechanical destruction that becomes an idol for primitive worship, and an ironic-affectionate meditation, 'Mutterstadt' (*JRB* I, 210). This poem foreshadows Becher's later architectural approach to the sonnet, in which elements are arranged in balance and tension with each other in order to arrive at a utopian spatial harmony.

A somewhat pedantic poetological poem, 'Sonett der Schlacht' (*JRB* I, 244), demonstrates Becher's approach to the form, equating fragmented imagery with the fragmentation of bodies, strict rhythms with the rhythms of machinery, and extended lines with the redemption that emerges from the carnage. This poem is interesting for the final tercet in brackets, anticipating dramatic effects from the assimilation of the world into aesthetic form:

Geschliffene Spiegel blenden solche Sätze.
Der Worte Rasetempo gleicht den Takten,
Den klirrend rasselnden, den abgehackten
Der Bombenschlünde, der Attackenhetzen.

Auf ihren langgestreckten Bahnen metzeln
Millionen sich. Gestaute Katarakte
Von Lilablut. Zerlumpfte Fahnen. Fetzen
Von Leib. Endlich überwölbt smaragden

Vom Abend, der behängt mit bunten Früchten,
Posaumentönen süßen, den Vokalen,
Sich Gold aufs Grau der weiten Felder malend,

(... Armeeen dröhnende hallen die Gedichte,
Die mit aus starrer Front gezücktem Strahl
Der Feinde Heer, der Schwere Geist vernichten...)

This text sits next to Expressionist poems such as 'Höhe 61' (*JRB* I, 229–30) or 'An die Soldaten' (*JRB* I, 233), which deal with the war in regular quatrains bursting with imagery of bodily destruction; the latter poem depicts the fragmented bodies of wounded soldiers who have returned home, but is more interested in the aesthetics of fragmentation than in the soldiers themselves:

Gespenster ein bröckelndes Heer auf öder Trift ihr!
Noch Klageschmerz längst Toter obgehäuft.
Wenn Hände —: zitterig. Ausgepreßt. Gleich Spinnen=
Gewürm den Fluß entlang. Die Wand anlaufend.

Becher is a frantic maker of new images in this period, but shows no interest in individuals or their subjectivity; the war poems deal for the most part with the demolition of bodies, while a number of poems about the city attempt to dethrone the individual as the focus of perception, while at the same time preserving the idea of the 'Dichter' as catalyst. 'Berlin! Berlin!' (*JRB* 1, 234) sees the city as a magnet for impersonal masses, rendering the shock of arrival from the provinces in disorientating imagery, both celebratory and threatening, and very different from the demonic city poetry of Georg Heym: 'Zementene Rose, rings von kalten Flecken | Laternenkuppeln magisch überbaut.' In this city, 'junge Dichter [reden] von Tribünen', but they are only part of the dynamic movement of the cityscape, which culminates in suicide and bodies merging with the city, out of which new possibilities awaken in the dramatic juxtaposition of radically different images in an impossible unity ('Knospe Schnee'):

Wir strömen ein. Von springenden Balkonen
 Saltomortaleclou auf heißen Platz.
 Aus Leibs kariierter Haut erblühen neue Zonen,
 Darauf wie Knospe Schnee die Sonne platzt.

The collection closes with Becher in his most tiresome rhetorical mode with a poem weaving Schiller's ode 'An die Freude' into a narrative of utopian brotherhood and resurrection emerging from the destruction of war ('An die Freude', *JRB* 1, 267–71). The repetitiveness of these gestures should, however, not close our eyes to the genuine richness and variety of Becher's work in this period.

After the sound and fury of the close of *An Europa*, the psychological direction taken by *Verbrüderung* (1916) marks a change for Becher, although the collection ends with familiar images of utopian destruction and recreation of the world. This shorter collection makes a more explicit connection between the speaker's textual subjectivity and the urgency of the self-overcoming and utopian longings that it ends with: the collection is dedicated to Becher's friends but is structured around the 'overcoming' of the Female in the name of radical political brotherhood. Becher also inserts autobiographical elements into the poems, alongside images drawn from psychoanalysis, in order to encourage an identificatory interpretation, retreating from the more decentred, anonymous 'Dichter' who had featured in some of the poems in *An Europa*.

The collection begins with an act of violence against the Father figured in trivial-psychoanalytical terms as oedipal vengeance for the Father's disruption of the child's desired union with the Mother ('Ödipus', *JRB* 1, 275–76). The intrusion of the Father's sexual desire into the Mother-Child dyad is externalized and distorted in a language of violent caricature, and the Father is depersonalized: 'Nun wird er gleich, ein Vieh, die Mutter packen. | Schnurrbart spritzt rechts und links gleich Bajonett.' The poem ends with the child's fantasy of *Vatermord*, but the narrative is suffused with caricature, making it unclear how far the child's perspective should be identified with that of the poem's speaker: the depiction of him an 'Indianer' suggests either that the child's game is a way of assimilating the oedipal trauma, or that the poem's psychoanalytical narrative is itself a game of masking and an exploration of Expressionist tropes:

Wo dein Sohn, Indianer, dir auflauert
 Zwischen Zähnen Beil er fiebernd kauert
 Vor dem Schlafgemach — bis schwirrend
 Saust das Beil! Das Beil —: es fällt dich an!

The poem 'Franziska' (*JRB* I, 277–78) tells the story of the suicide pact with Fanny Fuss as a continuation of the oedipal conflict, with the father disrupting their sexual union and the mother refusing comfort. Far from being a tribute to the woman herself, or an acknowledgment of pain or guilt, the events are built into the narrative of rejection of the Female; the Father's intervention makes union with the woman impossible, and the way back to the Mother is barred. 'Emmy' (*JRB* I, 280–81) shows Emmy Hennings as the artist's muse ('Du deren Mund an Horizonte knüpfte | Einst düsteren Dichter —: er träumt dich schwer') on whose body is written the avant-gardist's textual-political project:

Ja —: Satzgefüge tollste weißeln dich:
 Geschwür. Wirr deinen Körper geißelt
 Der Menschheit Auf= und Niedersteigen.

These, and the other women mentioned in the collection must be left behind ('Langsam muß der Dichter euch entgleiten, | Viel zu lange schon bei euch verweilt', 'Abschied von den Frauen', *JRB* I, 282–84 (p. 283)) in order to form the masculine collective that can take political action. *Verbrüderung* sees Becher engaging in a process of establishing the boundaries of the self-on-the-page, purging what is passive, weak and feminine in order to achieve an unambiguous clarity and simplicity:

Ihr —: laßt uns gern vom ewigen Frieden reden!
 Ja, wissend sehr, daß er Gestalt gewinnt
 Noch süßester Traum nur. Unsere Hände jäten
 Das Unkraut aus, das jenen Weg bespinnt.
 Ertön o Wort, das gleich zur Tat gerinnt!
 Das Wort muß wirken! Also laßt uns reden!! ('An den Frieden', *JRB* I, 294)

This self-image as 'Dichter' is no longer open to the world, but is fighting for clear boundaries: it is still figured here as a collective entity, but this is a struggle that will eventually take Becher back to bourgeois-professional literary ideals.

The collections that follow (*Päan gegen die Zeit* (1917), *Das neue Gedicht* (published 1919, held back by the censor since 1917), *Gedichte für ein Volk* (published 1918, held back since 1917) might seem to follow a similar path to Becher's previous work, and certainly many of the fundamental gestures are the same. However, there are a couple of developments that become clearer when one looks carefully: firstly, Becher is developing a more compressed approach to imagery in particular situations, under the influence of Futurist practice; secondly, there is a larger proportion of satirical, grotesque poems, and also of more reflective poems on non-political subjects, with fewer poems on the violence of war; thirdly, Becher begins to reflect more explicitly on the role and nature of the poet, rather than employing the poet in the text as an anonymous catalyst of

change; and finally, religious language becomes more prevalent and complex, pointing in the direction of his retreat from politics in the early 1920s. It is perhaps surprising to find these changes, given that Becher's talent for provoking political scandals was developing rapidly towards the end of the war: the fact that *Das neue Gedicht* carries the well-known 'Widmungsblatt zur Russischen Revolution' ('Augen zu: Laßt Guillotinen spielen!', *JRB* 1, 393) should, however, not distract us from the variety of its contents and the direction that Becher is taking.¹⁸

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Becher is beginning to work on a technique of compressing imagery into powerful juxtapositions, inserting small, explosive and complex ideas into the extended structures of his poems. There is a good example from the poem 'Traum=Finsternis' (*JRB* 11, 282–84), which is a nightmarish vision of the punishing rhythms of industrial production and their effect on the individual. Here, Becher conveys a complex of ideas about creativity, biology and the compression of space in a single image: 'Raum=Knoten entwuchern Gehirn=Wellen' (*JRB* 11, 282).

The use of '=' to join disparate nouns is a borrowing from Marinetti's 'analogy' technique, which breaks the constraints of Italian syntax in order to bring ideas into direct confrontation with each other, without the hierarchies of significance created by grammatical structures. The rules of German compound word-formation may make this seem less radical at first, but Becher adapts the technique to German by using it to work against the normal grammatical hierarchy. 'Gehirnwellen' would suggest that 'Wellen' is the base word, and 'Gehirn' the more specific, defining word, making 'brainwaves', but 'Gehirn=Wellen' establishes them as equal partners, opening up other possibilities.

Some of the poems in *Päan gegen die Zeit* explore similar techniques. 'Lokomotiven' (*JRB* 1, 334) is a pure piece of Futurist technology-worship, which is unusual in Becher's work, but it shows him at his most verbally creative: here, the force and speed of technology is described for its own sake, or rather, for the sake of liberating the word from referentiality and from political or psychological obligation. This is pure play, and all the better for it:

Die brüllen jäh ins Land —: Lokomotiven!
Steil ob der Viadukte Schwung die rasendsten Kokotten.
Die fest im Raum gestampfter Böden schliefen:
Ob Wiesen=Massen! Fluß=Turm! Nacht=Stern=Grotten!

The poem ends with a reflection on the role and nature of the poet that is possibly unique in Becher's work: the poet is not a catalyst or unifying principle, but small, light, playful and decentred:

¹⁸ Dwars has shown that these lines must originally have referred to the revolution of February 1917, rather than the Bolshevik revolution, since Becher had written them into a copy of *Verfall und Triumph* presented to Bachmair in October 1917.

(... Ein Dichter, Falter, schwebt um dich, du blankeres Tier.
 Du Majestät! wie zogst du ein in Hallen.
 Der Schwestern Piffte gell in Lüften schallen.
 Tier=Kräuter=Wildnis schmiegt im Glieder=Werk.)

Even when taken to an extreme, however, Becher's linguistic techniques rarely depart entirely from referentiality, since he expects real-world effects from his work: recognisable situations are described with a linguistic force designed to overcome the distance between language and world that Modernism had opened up, and thus to act on the world.

The programmatic opening poem to the collection, also entitled 'Päan gegen die Zeit' (*JRB* 1, 307–09) takes a different approach in a re-telling of the story of Babel, forming compound words that convey the violence associated with the division of a basic, universal humanity ('einzig Menschheit', p. 309):

Krummes Messer, Mond=Beil, deine Brauen, o Mensch!
 Kerker=Gemäuer deine Stirne o Mensch!?
 Finger=Gekrall wen würgt es o Mensch!
 Zähne=Gebiß wen zerhackt es o Mensch!?
 Atem=Hölle entschnaubst du o Mensch...
 Räuber=Mensch. Henker=Mensch. Mörder=Mensch. (*JRB* 1, 308)

The collective 'Mensch' begins to merge into 'God' in these poems: 'God' becomes a principle of unity, the goal of masculine self-transcendence into a collective once the impurities have been weeded out and boundaries established:

Versammelt euch Männer zum Rat. Zum Dienst des Gottes.
 Unlösbar sich verknüpft.

Bruder taucht in Bruder. Antlitz fließt.
 Fließt, und stockt. Glänzt. Schimmernd neu=fest.
 Falten rinnsal, Kloaken Wirrnis stäubend abgestreift.
 Frauen: Mütter über Schollen gebückt.

Daß ihr euch ordnet zum Zug. Über die irdischen der Höhen hinaus.
 Täler folgen euch: und das zerrüttetste auch: die schlingende Boas. Städte zahm
 Krokodil... ('Studien zu einem Chor', *JRB* 1, 385)

Other poems develop a similar theme: 'Mensch in Mensch! Und Mensch in Gott verwoben. | IHN lobpreisend Aller Münder toben' ('Fragment', *JRB* 1, 381–83 (p. 383)); 'Du biegest uns frei. Durch deinen Schein wie münden | Mensch tiefst in Mensch. Dir Himmlischen verbündet' ('Sentimentaler Monolog' *JRB* 1, 383–84 (p. 384)). It is not always clear who is being addressed, but these poems towards the end of *Päan gegen die Zeit* point in a new direction and to the use of 'God' as a new principle, not as a surrogate for the 'Dichter' (though there are exceptions to this, as I will show) but as a textual element that has reference to discourses beyond the poem, and which therefore seems to ground the linguistic experimentation in something real.

The 'Dichter' retains his role as catalyst for change, but instead of embodying a principle of destruction and recreation himself, he is now the intermediary whose

song raises humanity to its true goal. *Das Neue Gedicht* contains a number of poems in which Becher reflects more extensively on the role of the poet, and in particular, begins to create autobiographical origin stories for his own poetic persona, giving it more individuality than simply an anonymous prophetic voice. The word 'ich' appears more often in reference to the poet's voice, emphasizing a separateness from the collective and an individual persona.

The poem 'Gedichte für ein Volk' (JRB 1, 405–08) constructs a legend of self-overcoming and prophetic gestures: as so often, it is only after the overcoming of ambivalence, passivity, femininity and decadence that the poet's work can become effective:

Denn gesungen habe ich euch von der Überwindung des Leibs, des schmähhlichen, des vergänglichhen, des verderblichen; von dem Sieg über ein Scheusal=Geschlecht. Vom Fluch aller Zwiespältigkeit. Vom Kampf des Paars. Vom Ende der Einsamkeit. (JRB 1, 407)

Becher writes together politics, psychology and aesthetics, attempting to find a language that will transform the world by translating the discourses that constitute it into poetic language, recreating them, and projecting them outwards again. Becher finds a range of metaphors for this process: 'Einfange ich dich, Blut der Brüder, in den ungeheueren Trichter meiner Fanfare' ('Gedichte für ein Volk', JRB 1, 406); '— Zeit, in dir wandelnd der Dichter: ström an und beginne!' ('Gesang bei einer Stadt', JRB 1, 374–75 (p. 375)); 'Du Volk —: Gewalt, aus der dein Dichter brennt' ('An Berlin', JRB 1, 469).

Alongside these developments, Becher further develops the role of the 'Dichter' as political revolutionary: the language of revolution providing the stock of imagery that the war had offered, but now with a sense of forward movement guaranteed by external events rather than being forced by the poet's personality alone.

The 'Dichter' who appears in these poems becomes more tangible and individual, and even begins to develop a backstory, as Becher starts to work through his own biography and construct a myth of literary origins. 'Die Eroberung' (JRB 1, 338–40) figures the moment of rebellion against the parents as the moment of becoming the poet. The parents are represented in spatial terms, embodied in the dead Munich cityscape:

Furchtbare Stadt von Straßen der Kindheit verhängt!
In dein Gesicht die Falten der Eltern gesprengt. (JRB 1, 338)

Writing rebellious verses on the city's walls is equated with violence against the parents and teachers:

Friedhöfe durch der, längs der Kasernen er schwankte.
An die brüchigen Mauern DER Strophen: Dolchstöße er! — schrieb!!! (ibid.; italics in original)

The dramatic and unconventional emphasis of these lines ('der' is a pronoun here) hammers home the focus on 'er/der' as the rebellious individual and the individual

will be involved in the moment of literary birth: the overblown rhetoric of these lines makes it easy to overlook the skilful construction of the patterns of emphasis and the pull of classical metre underneath.

The rebel has become a poet on the journey from Munich to Berlin:

Aus heimatlichen Grabgefilden
Schmiß ihn den Dichter nächtiger Schwung
Des D=Zugs. (*JRB* 1, 339)

We misunderstand this poetry if we look in it for ‘authentic’ autobiographical narratives, or condemn it for its ‘dishonesty’ for failing to acknowledge the help and support that Becher received from his parents for his early literary experiments. This is a myth of literary origins that tells us something about the transitional phase in Becher’s work: instead of simply enacting the literary rebellion in his work and in the performance of the role of ‘Dichter’, Becher now begins to construct a history that defines it more clearly. Becher seeks a way of continuing the momentum of his radicalism, but the narrative that is in the process of being created here has the effect of defining the ‘Dichter’ as an individual entity separate from the phenomena described in the texts: a literary ‘personality’ is beginning to form, with boundaries crystallizing between internal and external. He is now on the road to establishing the effect of subjectivity and authenticity that many of Becher’s interpreters value.

Self-criticism is a vital part of this developing narrative: a tone of self-directed sarcasm creeps into some of the work, which develops the already established themes of self-overcoming and weeding out impurities, decadence and ambivalence in a more concretely autobiographical direction, establishing concerns that will become commonplace in Becher’s later work. In ‘Heilige Schafe’, Becher dismisses the poet’s anxiety, self-alienation and reliance on others for confirmation and the strength for renewal:

Wie fügst du dich in fabelhaften Reimen!
Du baust dich fest, wie fremd, in Mensch wie Ding.
Wie krallst du dich verzweifeltst durch die Wände.
... Ihr! Haltet mich! Beweist mich! Zeugt mich neu! (*JRB* 1, 497)

This is a text about establishing boundaries, about the individual resisting the temptation to merge with the Other or to disappear from view in the text: it is about responsibility and healing, but also about defining what is internal and external, what is personality and what is background. In other words, it is a step towards re-establishing a narrative of *Bildung*, through a process of self-punishment.

Becher rarely works with the idea of the poet as madman — his work is too concerned with willpower and conscious effort for this — but ‘Der Epileptiker’ (*JRB* 1, 442) does suggest such an idea, with creation arising from bodily torment and self-harm: the poem’s final line suggests a metaphor for artistic creation in the epileptic’s bloodied lips, and the ‘Falter’ is here reminiscent of the poet in ‘Lokomotiven’: ‘Lippen durchbissene: Hänge Purpur benippt von Falter melo-discherem Geschwärl.’

This series of contrasting reflections on poetic creation still sits alongside the developing autobiographical narrative that I have commented on; we miss this variety if we simply bring one measure to judge the work by, or if we only look at it in the light of our retrospective knowledge about Becher's career.

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Becher's work during the 'Expressionist decade' is too varied to allow an easy summary, and cannot be reduced to any particular political or aesthetic stance. We can, however, identify certain repeated gestures, preoccupations, and stylistic features, and trace a development in which he begins to give his textual personality a shape and history. If we refrain from reading his work as a reflection of his chaotic lifestyle — a reading that certainly suggests itself, but which is seriously reductive — then we find that the key feature of Becher's work is its discipline, sense of control, and seriousness as an aesthetic project. That this discipline is often put at the service of an aesthetics of excess and linguistic destruction is a major contributor to the fascination of this work.

Even if just in the shadow of a classical poetic form or a moment of regular metre, the humanist inheritance is never completely abandoned; in fact, most of Becher's work, including his most extreme Futurist experiments, either employ, or suggest in some way, forms inherited from the German tradition. Becher pushes these forms to an extreme, but never abandons them. His focus on the dissolution and remaking of poetic forms, of the bourgeois tradition, and of the view of the individual connected with that tradition, means that his work can stand as a testimony to the effort of will, self-directed violence and purging of undesirable elements of the self required to uphold that inheritance under the conditions of modernity.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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